ART REVIEW

Tracing the Education of Michelangelo

The Met's exhibition shows how the master used drawing to experiment, refine and expand his work—both on and off the page.

By Cammy Brothers
Nov. 11, 2017 7:00 a.m. ET

New York

It's rare that a major museum gives drawings top billing. They are not seen as alluring enough to engage the public. But one thing they can do is lift the veil on the artistic process, even for such a secretive artist as Michelangelo (1475-1564). And the Met's new exhibition does this beautifully.

Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman and Designer

The Met Fifth Avenue
Nov. 13-Feb. 12, 2018

"Michelangelo: Divine Draftsman and Designer," organized by Carmen Bambach, a drawings curator at the Met, contains 133 drawings by the master as well as works in other media. She has transformed an encyclopedic survey into a page turner.

MORE ART REVIEWS

- Tracing the Education of Michelangelo November 11, 2017
- 'Her Paris: Women Artists in the Age of Impressionism' Review: Recognizing Talent, 150 Years On November 8, 2017
- 'Gurlitt: Status Report' Review: What the Nazis Took November 1, 2017

The show is organized chronologically and thematically, with the objects providing a generous sense of context. Michelangelo is presented not in the familiar way as a lone genius, but as an apprentice, collaborator and teacher, an artist learning from his elders and working alongside his contemporaries and students.

Some of the most revealing sections of this exhibition are the suites of drawings of the same theme, each showing subtle corrections or modifications. To see drawings side by side that were made at the same time but have been dispersed geographically for hundreds of years is to feel like a bystander in Michelangelo's workshop.

Page Through Michelangelo's Sketchbooks

An exhibition at the Met contains 133 drawings by the master as well as works in other media.

Michelangelo's 'Portrait of Andrea Quaratesi' (1532) THE BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON

7 of 8

Among the most stunning examples are the three versions (four including a copy in rock crystal) of "Fall of Phaeton," an exceptional composition showing, in the center, four horses hurtling toward earth in various contortions. We see Michelangelo's process of revision, as well as his humility—scrawled on the pages are notes seeking the approval of his beloved friend, Tommaso dei Cavalieri, a young Roman nobleman.

In their subject matter and execution, "Fall of Phaeton" and several other sheets—including "The Dream," "The Archers" and "Punishment of Tityos"—were unprecedented in the history of drawing. The modeling is so subtle that art historians initially speculated that Michelangelo had not used chalk to shade but to make dots, a technique known as stippling. This theory has since been discredited, but that it came up at all is a testament to how unusual Michelangelo's drawings were. Rather than doing something differently, he was doing the same thing as everybody else, only better.

In these drawings, subject matter was almost secondary, just a pretext for showing what he could do with the figure. On the reverse of "Punishment of Tityos," he rotated the sheet 90 degrees, traced the outline of Tityos, and arrived at the figure of "Risen Christ" (not visible in the exhibition but in the catalog), which he used in several more

Michelangelo's 'Sketch for a Risen Christ' (1530-32) PHOTO: ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST/© HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II 2017

drawings. This illustrates a paradox of Michelangelo's work, one amply on view: His originality was not built on an infinite capacity to invent new ideas but on a tremendous efficiency at recycling them. These transformations were not about content; the only principle was never let a good idea go to waste.

The most spectacular revelation of context comes in the room devoted to the Sistine Chapel. Accompanying each drawing is a photograph of the relevant portion of the fresco, and a digital reproduction of the entire ceiling has been installed overhead. Viewers can see the fragmentary limbs and torsos Michelangelo drew on multiple sheets in precise relation to where they ended up.

Michelangelo's 'Design for the Tomb of Pope Julius II della Rovere' (1505-06) PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Art historians still puzzle over the ceiling's meaning, but anyone looking at the drawings will recognize that it is among other things a celebration of the beauty of man. As Michelangelo's contemporaries noted, he fashioned a new kind of male body: not the slender young figures of the studio apprentices, but bodies that had known work. They may make us think of the gym, but to Renaissance eyes they evoked labor. His critics complained that he showed ruffians rather than refined men.

Emotion is one of the elusive elements of Michelangelo's art, it comes and goes. Among his most emotional works were also his most private, the series of Crucifixion drawings he did toward the end of his life. The outlines have been traced and retraced with an obsessive hand, so that the contours can barely be found. This is drawing as a form of meditation and as an act of private devotion.

Ms. Bambach is to be commended for not being stingy with the architectural drawings—among the most ravishing ever made, but sometimes excluded because they are deemed less accessible or appealing. Michelangelo's fortification drawings, represented here by one stunning example, read as a cross between a biomorphic creature, a crustacean, and

'The Torment of Saint Anthony' (1487), attributed to Michelangelo PHOTO: KIMBELL ART MUSEUM, FORT WORTH

a terrifying robot. They take us into a world in which design was considered central to defense—as if the Pentagon kept Frank Gehry on retainer. Another exceptional sheet in this room is the drawing of the monumental stairs of the Laurentian Library, combining ink wash with red chalk, profiles and perspective in strange juxtaposition.

If there is a missed opportunity here, it is about attribution. A sculpture known as "Young Archer" and "The Torment of St. Anthony," a small painting, are said to be by Michelangelo but the issue is still far from settled. This would have been an occasion to invite the public into the discussion, but the labels fail to address these matters.

Still, for the Met, these days in hot pursuit of the new, this exhibition demonstrates how the old can be new again, and that there may be few things sexier than the rippled muscles of Michelangelo's nudes, ever so supplely rendered in soft black chalk.

—Ms. Brothers is a professor at Northeastern University and the author of "Michelangelo, Drawing, and the Invention of Architecture" (Yale).

‘Young Archer’ (1490), attributed to Michelangelo PHOTO: THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART